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Detective fiction and the metafictional strategies in James McCreet's Neo-Victorian novels

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ABSTRACT

The significance of this paper emanates from its endeavor to initiate the filling of the gap in the scholarship on James McCreet's work. James McCreet (b. 1971) is a contemporary British novelist who revisits the Victorian Age in his four novels: *The Incendiary's Trail (2009), The Vice Society (2010), The Thieves' Labyrinth (2011), and The Masked Adversary (2012*. This paper clarifies that McCreet's novels encompass both neo-Victorianism and postmodern metafiction. As historiographic metafictional novels, they subvert the notions of absolute truth and objectivity. McCreet subverts the Victorian assumptions to knowledge and truth through the parodic appropriation and reformulation of the detective plot, as manifested in the work of Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle. Among the postmodern metafictional strategies that McCreet relies on are the unreliable narrator, the self-reflexive mode, intertextuality, parody, and irony. McCreet's parodic intertextuality is essential because it allows the reader to explore, on the one hand, the power and the limitations of the traditional detective novel and on the other, the possibilities that can be gained from the reworking of the detective plot. Moreover, through installing and then subverting the nineteenth-century conventions the reader perceives many instances of irony.

KEYWORDS: detective fiction, metafiction, neo-victorian novels, self-reflexivity, intertextuality, narrative strategies, James Mccreet, postmodern fiction

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Public Interest Statement

This study addresses a gap in literary scholarship by offering one of the first systematic analyses of the novels of contemporary British writer James McCreet. By examining how McCreet reworks Victorian detective fiction through postmodern metafictional strategies, the paper highlights how historical narratives and ideas of truth are questioned and reshaped in contemporary fiction. The study is of interest to readers and scholars concerned with neo-Victorian literature, detective fiction, and the ways modern novels reinterpret cultural and literary traditions for present-day audiences.

Introduction

James McCreet (b. 1971) takes the contemporary reader on a journey to the Victorian Age through his literary detective novels. He employs the postmodern metafictional techniques to subvert the nineteenth-century detective plot. This paper first examines the type of plots that metafictionists opt to use. Then, it proceeds to explore the reasons that make the detective plot one of the favorite types for the metafictionists. Finally, it analyzes the way McCreet subverts the conventions of detective fiction that he has appropriated in his four neo-Victorian novels: *The Incendiary's Trail* (2009), *The Vice Society* (2010), *The Thieves' Labyrinth* (2011), and *The Masked Adversary* (2012).

There can be few literary genres that have such a long-lasting influence on popular and canonical fiction as detective fiction. The genre dates back to the nineteenth century, and it developed together with the increasing belief in rationality, empirical observation, and scientific advancement in Victorian society. The promise of early detective stories to bring order to a fast-paced world was to establish the fact that it was possible to find the truth through logic and methodical investigation. However, in modern fiction, such formerly secure assumptions have been subject to more and more doubt. Contemporary novelists often reiterate the detective form not to assert its certainties, but to challenge its narrative conventions, and representations of objectivity. This retrogression to the past, especially the Victorian one, became a typical characteristic of neo-Victorian literature, a genre that revisits the nineteenth century to challenge the construction and representation of history, knowledge, and truth. In the last few decades, researchers have given significant consideration to neo-Victorian fiction and postmodern metafiction and how the neo-Victorian writers re-create the Victorian era using irony, parody, and self-referential narrative techniques. Historiographic metafiction, which is a mode that installs and subverts historical narratives, has been influentially theorized as a way to negotiate with the past by a range of critics, including Linda Hutcheon, who has theorized it as a mode of engagement with historiographic instability by engaging with the past. On the same note, detective fiction studies have followed the development of the genre as based on a rational model laid down by Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle to discursive and ambiguous, self-conscious versions of the genre in postmodernist writing. It has been demonstrated that the detective plot, with its focus on clues, interpretation, and narrative authority, is especially amenable to metafictional experimentation. Although this is a growing body of scholarship, much of the extant research has been done concerning well-established writers and canonical neo-Victorian writings, and less-known writers in contemporary times have not been discussed extensively. James McCreet, a British novelist, whose four neo-Victorian novels, *The Incendiary Trail* (2009), *The Vice Society* (2010), *The Thieves Labyrinth* (2011), and *The Masked Adversary* (2012), revisit the Victorian detective tradition, with a particular focus on the postmodern context, is one such character. Though McCreet's fiction works directly with the tropes of the nineteenth-century detective plot, it also disrupts their underlying principles of truth, authority, and narrative resolution. Up to this time, however, his work has not attracted much sustained critical interest, and no systematic analysis of the work has been done on how his novels intersect with detective fiction, neo-Victorianism, and postmodern metafiction. This absence of academic interest reveals a massive gap in the literature. Though the general consideration of metafictional detective narrative has been done by critics, the systematic and parodic reenactment of the Victorian detective plot by McCreet is yet to be explored. Specifically, the means through which his novels use the metafictional strategies, which include unreliable narration, self-reflexivity, intertextuality, parody, and irony to deconstruct the nineteenth-century belief in objective truth, have not been thoroughly examined. In the absence of such a study, we would not be able to fully comprehend how modern neo-Victorian fiction re-invents detective fiction as a mode of epistemological and historiographical criticism. It is this gap that the present paper attempts to fill by arguing that the neo-Victorian novels of James McCreet serve both to

appropriate and subvert conventions of Victorian detective fiction in the form of historiographic metafictional texts. With the help of the intertextual approach to the works of Poe and Conan Doyle that can be described as a parody, McCreet reveals the constraints of the traditional detective model and, at the same time, allows him to test the narrative possibilities of this genre. His novels do not support one unquestionable truth, but predict uncertainty, plurality, and interpretive indeterminacy, and thus present the detective genre to postmodern issues of knowledge and representation. The paper is structured in a number of steps in order to establish this argument. It analyzes first the nature of the plots that metafictional authors use and why the detective plot has been particularly appealing to postmodern writers. It subsequently contextualizes the work of McCreet in the neo-Victorianism and historiographic metafiction traditions, where he uses self-reflexive narrative strategies. Lastly, the paper provides an in-depth critique of the four novels by McCreet on how his parodic intertextuality, his ironic narrative, and his manipulation of the genre norms challenge the reader to re-evaluate the power and the constraints of the detective fiction as a way of knowing history and truth.

Literature Review

Accordingly, this paper turns to the poetics of metafiction, so as to justify placing McCreet's neo-Victorian novels within the realm of the metafictional texts. In *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, Linda Hutcheon defines metafiction as "fiction about fiction—that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity" (1). In a similar study entitled *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, Patricia Waugh finds that in the metafictional text, the reader's attention is "called to the ontological status of the fictional text" (45).

Like many literary critics and commentators on postmodernism, in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, Hutcheon acknowledges the crucial role that the metafictional mode plays in postmodern fiction and clarifies the ontological reasons that prompted postmodern novelists to depart from the assumptions of realism. According to Hutcheon, "postmodernism in fiction paradoxically uses and abuses the conventions of both realism and modernism and does so to challenge their transparency" (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 53). She continues to say that the postmodern is "historical and metafictional, contextual and self-reflexive, ever aware of its status as discourse, as a human construct" (*Ibid.* 53). In other words, postmodern novelists deem reality as an illusion, a linguistic construct, and by extension, the same applies to individual personality. For these reasons, postmodern novelists regard the conventions of realism as mere literary devices incapable of representing reality.

In addition to the ontological factors, the rapid proliferation of the metafictional mode originated in the new ways novelists perceived the experience of writing. Hutcheon notes that the "political, social, and intellectual experience of the 1960s helped make it possible for postmodernism to be seen as what Kristeva calls 'writing-as-experience-of-limits'" (*Ibid.* 8). Hutcheon also gives credit to the way Edward Said perceives writing. For Said, the "writer thinks less of writing originally, and more of rewriting. The image for writing changes from original *inscription* [the emphasis in the original] to parallel script" (as cited in Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative* xvi). As the notions associated with the experience of writing have changed, the writers and readers must equip themselves with necessary tools for the new challenges. Graham Allen expresses his concerns about this new challenge when he states that "without a working knowledge of intertextual theory and practice, readers are likely to retain traditional notions of writing and reading, notions which have been radically challenged since the 1960s" (7).

In terms of the structure of the metafictional text, literary critics and commentators on the formal attributes of the genre propose several types. For Hutcheon, four kinds of plot structure are prominent. She finds that the "detective plot, fantasy, games, and the erotic . . . are in no way exclusive, but represent only four of the most visible forms presently in use in metafiction" (*Narcissistic Narrative* 71). Waugh, on the other hand, extends the range of choices to include the following: "science fiction, ghost stories, westerns, detective stories, popular romance" (*Metafiction* 81). However, she highlights the notion that "probably the most formulaic of the popular fictional forms used in contemporary writing is the detective story" (*Ibid.* 82).

Similarly, Louisa Hadley argues in *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us* that "in recent years, however, there has been an upsurge in novels adopting the conventions of detective fiction, not only in genre fiction . . . but also in literary fictions and especially in postmodern fiction" (60). As for Allen, he finds that "contemporary literature seems concerned with echoing and playing with previous stories,

classic texts and long-established genres such as romance and the detective story" (5). Hutcheon, Waugh, Hadley, and Allen are all in agreement that the parodic appropriation of the detective plot is evident in the work of many metafictionists. They also highlight the fact that the appropriated plot structures are from popular forms.

As for the significance of the detective plot, we turn to Tzvetan Todorov and Hadley. In his chapter entitled "The Typology of Detective Fiction" in *The Poetics of Prose*, Todorov finds that in detective fiction, there are two stories: the story of crime and the story of investigation. "The first—the story of the crime—tells 'what really happened,' whereas the second—the story of the investigation—explains 'how the reader (or the narrator) has come to know about it'" (Todorov 45). For Todorov, the second story is of no real significance, as he believes that it "serves only as a mediator between reader and the story of the crime" (*Ibid.* 46).

Hadley takes her cue from Todorov's insights and puts them within the broader context of neo-Victorianism and postmodernism. "The terms in which Todorov conceives of this difference between the two stories correlates to the distinction that is often made between history and historiography" (Hadley 61). She draws an analogy between the detective and the historian. For her, the story of the past resembles the story of the crime, as each of them shares the distinctive feature of "'absence,'" which Todorov has designated, and for her, how the detective comes to learn about the past is similar to "'how the historian has come to know about the past.'" (*Ibid.* 61). Hadley adds that "whereas Todorov suggests that the investigation plot has 'no importance in itself,' neo-Victorian fictions reveal the importance of the narratives of the past and the extent to which those narratives can determine our view of the past" (61-2). McCreet also expresses a similar epistemic concern when Mr Askern, the writer, explains to Sergeant Williamson that writers are similar to detectives. "Yes, we both seek information. You seek it in pursuit of a crime, I in pursuit of knowledge — for my books" (*The Incendiary's Trail* 150). In McCreet's texts, the story of the pursuit of knowledge of both the crime and the Victorian era is of considerable importance.

As many metafictionists draw on popular forms to provide their narratives with modeling structures and subsequently rework them, it is important to understand the significance of such a practice. Waugh finds that "writers experiment more commonly with the formulaic motifs of popular literary traditions which have often passed into cinematic forms of representation" (*Metafiction* 81). Based on her understanding of J. G. Cavetti's definition of the literary formula, Waugh finds that "the formula works by gradually imposing itself upon consciousness until it becomes the accepted vehicle of a particular set of attitudes, while allowing for a limited amount of individual variation" (*Ibid.* 81). She continues to explain how metafiction treats formula in a different way by stating that "metafiction, however, offers both innovation *and* [the emphasis is in the original] familiarity through the individual reworking and undermining of familiar conventions" (*Ibid.* 12). More importantly, since these forms become familiar to the reader, they can be used for projecting "serious concerns of the present day" (*Ibid.* 86). McCreet projects his concerns about the writing experience and the difficulties that writers face before they publish their literary and non-literary texts.

Theoretical Framework

There are two substantial reasons that prompted postmodernist writers as McCreet to revisit the nineteenth century. The first reason for the choice of the nineteenth century as the era in question lies in the fact that it is the period in which the Police appeared as an organized institution. In England, in 1829, Sir Robert Peel laid the foundations for the Metropolitan Police Force. Hadley believes that the creation of the Metropolitan Police "can be understood as a response to the fear and anxiety caused by the anonymity of the city" (64). P. D. James writes that "some historians of the genre claim that the detective story . . . could not exist until society had an official detective force, which in England would be in 1842, when the detective department of the Metropolitan Police came into being" (18).

McCreet's novels: *The Incendiary's Trail* (2009), *The Vice Society* (2010), *The Thieves' Labyrinth* (2011), and *The Masked Adversary* (2012) revolve around the crimes that the Detective Force tries to solve. The historical Police Commissioner Sir Richard Mayne is appropriated from the Police archives and is set to work with the detectives from the Detective Force and with agents who do not officially belong to the Detective Force, but whose assistance proves to be invaluable. As the official detectives make their way through the pages of McCreet's novels, they pass numerous references to the history of the Metropolitan Police and the Detective Force. A case in point is the following excerpt. "One of the first policemen to join in 1829, he [Inspector

Newsome] had dedicated years to maintaining order on the streets and been a natural choice for the highest ranks of the new Detective Force" (*The Incendiary's Trail* 36).

The second reason for appropriating the nineteenth century is concerned with the literary history of the detective genre. As such, McCreet's parodic intertextuality allows his novels to be engaged with the origins of the detective fiction. According to Hutcheon, "parody becomes a way of ironically revisiting the past – of both art and history" (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 99). The subsequent discussion will focus on McCreet's parodic intertextuality with the masters of the genre. The dialogue in question manifests itself in the epigraph that McCreet lifted from Doyle at the outset of *The Incendiary's Trail*, in which Doyle pays tribute to Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), the father of detective fiction. In the epigraph Doyle says: "If every man who receives a cheque for a story which owes its springs to Poe were to pay tithe to a monument for the master, he would have a pyramid as big as that of Cheops" (*The Incendiary's Trail*).

In addition to the epigraph, the covers of McCreet's novels establish a direct link with Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. On the cover of *The Vice Society*, a statement reads as follows: "Before Sherlock Holmes there was Albert Newsome." Likewise on the cover of *The Thieves' Labyrinth*, there is a statement that reads as following: "Before Sherlock Holmes there was George Williamson." Through acknowledging his indebtedness to Doyle and Poe, McCreet aims at paying homage to the masters of the genre. This objective takes three stages. It starts first with the intertextual dimension of Doyle's quotation in the epigraph which directs McCreet to Poe.

Owing to the outstanding role that Poe plays in the detective fiction writing, McCreet retraces the source of Poe's inspiration. In *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction*, Heather Worthington finds a connection between Vidocq's Paris and Poe. She writes: "Poe is, of course, American, but he chose to set his stories concerned with crime in the Paris of Vidocq, that is, the Paris of the early nineteenth century" (xiv). In *Crime Fiction*, John Scaggs explores another aspect of the significance of the Paris setting. He explains that "the Paris setting contributes to the formula that Poe's stories set out by employing existing police and detective forces [that were established by Vidocq in 1812] as a foil to Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin's analytical genius" (Scaggs 19).

In addition to the paratextual elements, McCreet's dialogue with the masters of the genre is evident in his appropriation of the nineteenth-century detective plot. It invariably takes the form of a parodic intertextuality. For Hutcheon, as a "form of ironic representation, parody is doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies" (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 97). In *The Masked Adversary*, McCreet allows the fictional Vidocq to tell the fictional Sir Richard Mayne that he sees himself in Noah Dyson. Vidocq says: "When I was active in Paris, they knew my name but they did not know my face. Your Mr Dyson is hardly known at all. You should always value a fellow like that" (*The Masked Adversary* 223).

Ever since his appearance in the first novel, Dyson has practiced Vidocq's methods of investigations. In James Morton's book *The First Detective: the Life and Revolutionary Times of Vidocq*, the epithet, "master of disguise," is constantly associated with Vidocq (143). In his novels, McCreet associates the same epithet with Dyson. However, McCreet only makes this connection between Dyson and Vidocq evident in his fourth novel, *The Masked Adversary*. Therefore, McCreet has indirectly and directly given life to Vidocq's *Memoires*. While most literary historians trace the origin of the detective fiction to Poe, McCreet in his novels entertains the possibility that Vidocq must have also played a role in the origin of the detective fiction. Like McCreet, Worthington acknowledges Vidocq's contribution to the detective fiction. As such, she writes: "His [Vidocq's] *Memoires* cannot be ignored: they are an important element in the development of the crime fiction genre and influenced other writers concerned with crime, most clearly, perhaps, Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle" (Worthington xiv).

The conventions of the genre of crime fiction form an integral part in McCreet's parodic intertextuality. He appropriates them and then he formulates them. Worthington notes that crime narratives are composed of: "a crime, a criminal, a victim and detective" (*Ibid.* ix). As for the origins of the conventions of the genre, Hadley maintains that it is in the stories of Doyle that the conventions of detective fiction were shaped, "most obviously as related to the figure of the detective" (Hadley 64). Next is an analysis of the figure of the detective in McCreet's novels.

In the world of the nineteenth-century detective fiction, two detective figures were influential: Poe's the Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin and Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. They are both amateur detectives whose foil is the professional detective. In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," Poe forms an intertextual dialogue with Vidocq.

He takes Vidocq as a reference point to show the difference between the professional detective and the amateur detective. Dupin says: "Vidocq, for example, was a good guesser, and a persevering man. But, without educated thought, he erred continually by the very intensity of his investigations" (Poe 85-6). In this way, Poe enshrines the qualities of the amateur detective whose class and education place him above the professional detective working for the Police in the nineteenth century. In *A Study in Scarlet*, like Poe before him, Doyle makes a distinction between his Holmes and Poe's Dupin, where Holmes says: "He [Dupin] had some analytical genius, no doubt; but he was by no means such a phenomenon as Poe appeared to imagine." (Doyle 24).

In addition to the fictional nineteenth-century detectives that McCreet forms an ontological dialogue with, McCreet finds his inspiration in Jack Whicher, a real Victorian detective. In this sense, McCreet establishes intertextuality with Kate Summerscale's book *The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher: A Shocking Murder and the Undoing of a Great Victorian Detective* (2008). This neo-Victorian book endeavors to unearth a real Victorian murder at Road Hill House that Detective-Inspector Jack Whicher investigated in 1860. The Road Hill murder gained a wide public interest because the victim, Saville Kent, was three years old. Nonetheless, Whicher's investigations led him to an unexpected turn when he accused Constance Kent, Saville's half-sister of the murder. In fact, such an accusation made Whicher face an enormous outrage in the media which took the side of the upper-middle class daughter against the lower-class detective. Consequently, Whicher's reputation was damaged. E. J. Wagner writes that "Whicher, excoriated for having placed under arrest a shining example of English maidenhood, resigned from Scotland Yard" (205). Several years later, Constance unexpectedly admitted killing Saville. However, it remains uncertain whether Constance was helped by her brother William or not. As such, the narrator leaves the matter open to speculation underscoring the impossibility of knowing truth.

Though Summerscale deals with a real story, she appropriates the country-house plot structure, which became popular with Wilkie Collins' (1824-1889) novel *The Moonstone* (1868) and later it was skillfully employed by Agatha Christie (1890-1976). However, Summerscale makes it clear that the murder of Saville itself was an inspiration for Collins and the writers that followed him. She writes: "This book [*The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher: A Shocking Murder and the Undoing of a Great Victorian Detective*] is modelled on the country-house mystery, the form that the Road Hill case inspired, and uses some of the devices of detective fictions" (Summerscale xiii).

As for the significance of Collins' *The Moonstone*, we turn to T. S. Eliot. In his essay "Wilkie Collins and Dickens," Eliot writes that "The Moonstone is the first and greatest of English detective novels" (413). He explains that the reason for his preference of Collins to Poe and Doyle is the character of Sergeant Cuff in *The Moonstone*. For Eliot, "sergeant Cuff, far more than Holmes, is the ancestor of the healthy generation of amiable, efficient, professional but fallible inspectors of fiction among whom we live today [1927]" (*Ibid.* 413). Summerscale believes that Sergeant Cuff is based on Jack Whicher. In her book, Summerscale writes that "Whicher was the inspiration for that story's [Collins' novel *The Moonstone*] cryptic Sergeant Cuff, who has influenced nearly every detective hero since" (xi).

Interestingly enough, McCreet bases the character of former detective, George Williamson, on the historical figure of Jack Whicher. This appears in two important instances in which McCreet forms intertextuality with Summerscale's book. The first instance concerns Williamson's appearance. "The detective's [Williamson's] pockmarked face bespoke a near fatal acquaintance with smallpox that lent a perpetual scowl to his features" (*The Incendiary's Trail* 5). Summerscale, on the other hand, writes: "His face [Whicher's] was pitted with smallpox scars" (xxiii).

The other example is related to an incident in the professional life of Whicher. As Whicher is a talented detective, he has the ability to predict how a criminal might act. The following incident that took place in 1851 is a case in point. "Over the next few weeks Whicher and a colleague watched the pair size up the bank. The policemen lay in wait until, on 28 June, they caught the crooks red-handed, fleeing the bank with their loot" (*Ibid.* 53). A similar incident takes place in McCreet's fourth novel. In *The Masked Adversary*, as Inspector Newsome reads some newspaper clippings, he finds an item concerning Williamson. The news item reads as follow: "Having observed the activities of the thief for some time, Sergeant Williamson was able to discern that the fellow would attempt his boldest robbery yet on the night of the full moon" (*The Masked Adversary* 173). In a similar manner to Whicher, Williamson waits for the criminal's arrival in order to apprehend him. "Thus, when the criminal ventured into the building, he found the ingenious detective [Whicher] waiting for him with

a pair of handcuffs" (*Ibid*, 173). In this respect, McCreet's novels act as a prequel to Summerscale's book *The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher: A Shocking Murder and the Undoing of a Great Victorian Detective*.

As for the issue of the method of detection in McCreet's novels, McCreet appropriates Dupin's and Holmes' method of detection, which is ratiocination. Hadley states that "the Holmesian model of ratiocination was derived as much from actual nineteenth-century practices as it was from the model of Dupin" (65). In fact, "Poe termed [his detective stories] 'tales of ratiocination'" (Scaggs 21). In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," the narrator is Dupin's unnamed friend, and he explains the method of detection by saying: "But it is in matters beyond the limits of mere rule that the skill of the analyst is evinced. He makes, in silence, a host of observations and inferences" (Poe 76). He continues to say that "so, perhaps, do his companions; and the difference in the extent of the information obtained, lies not so much in the validity of the inference as in the quality of the observation" (*Ibid.* 76).

Hadley notes that quite often Holmes' stories start with a demonstration of his method in the form of a close study of a person or an object (66). The information that he deduces from his reading of the details of the study in question proves later to be correct. In Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," Dupin astonishes the narrator when he reveals to him that he has guessed what he has been thinking about from a mere observation of his body language (Poe 78-80). Such a brief demonstration of the mental ability that the detective possesses mirrors the wider mystery that the detective will successfully solve as the story progresses. Though McCreet continues Doyle's tradition of including a minor mystery concerning the nature of an unknown object or person, he does not open his novels with it, nor does he use it to demonstrate the detective's successful ability in solving future mysteries of a much more demanding quality.

In McCreet's novels, the work of one detective, no matter how skillful he is, is not enough for solving challenging mysteries. Each of the six detectives is valuable for the unveiling of the many layers that shroud the mystery. Even then, they never reach the whole truth. In *The Thieves' Labyrinth*, for example, Noah Dyson solves the mystery of the missing brooch; however, for solving the mystery of the missing ship *Aurora*, he has to combine his efforts with those of the others. Therefore, McCreet employs the self-contained little mysteries in order to underscore the alarming difference between them and the intricate mysteries.

Reputed for their interest in mysteries, Dupin and Holmes experience terrible boredom when they do not work on a difficult case. In McCreet's novels, Dyson's attitudes towards detection form intertextuality with those of Dupin and Holmes. A case in point is when Dyson solves the mystery of the missing diamond brooch. The authorial voice informs the reader that "if it looked like chivalry to her [the owner of the brooch], it had been merely an afternoon's entertainment for him [Dyson]: a diversion from the tedium of which he had grown so tired" (*The Thieves' Labyrinth* 58).

While Poe and Doyle focus on amateur detectives, whose lifestyles do not depend on what they make from the cases that they solve, McCreet's novels dedicate ample space to the professional detectives who work or have worked for the Detective Force and to the amateur detectives alike. McCreet's reworking of the genre registers in his emphasis on the importance of acknowledging the efforts of every detective participating in solving a case. As such, his practice is different than that of both Poe and Doyle. In both Poe's and Doyle's detective stories, the unnamed narrator who is a friend of Dupin and Watson, who is Holmes' friend and chronicler, glorify Dupin and Holmes in their narrativization of their friends' adventures. In this respect, for Poe and Doyle, one hero dominates the analytical field: the amateur detective. He is the hero of the nineteenth century.

Whilst the amateur detective enjoys a privileged status in the nineteenth-century detective fiction, the professional detectives of the Police are assigned a secondary status. The first reason for this visible hierarchy in the nineteenth-century fiction and early twentieth-century fiction lies in the class of the detective. Worthington notes that "while police began to feature in British criminography after 1829, their lower-class origins, social position as public servants and necessary association with criminality seem to have limited the potential for them to be literary heroes" (142). She also explains that "in British crime fiction in the first part of the twentieth century, class, it seems, still plays a part in keeping the police in a supporting rather than central role" (*Ibid.* 145).

In McCreet's novels, only Police Commissioner Sir Richard Mayne is an upper-class member, whereas the other six detectives are of a working-class origin. "If he [Inspector Newsome] had the reputation of being

something of a ruffian – and he did – it was perhaps because he had progressed through the university of the broken bottle and the shouted expletive rather than Oxford or Cambridge" (*The Incendiary's Trail* 36). As McCreet brings the lower-class detective to the center of the narrative, he registers a reworking of the genre that marginalizes the work of a professional detective in the nineteenth century. As such, McCreet recovers parts of the untold stories of the marginalized, which are central to the postmodern project.

Other commentators on the genre attribute the strained relationship between the professional detective or the police and the amateur detective in the nineteenth-century fiction to the way the police was perceived in the nineteenth century. Hadley believes that "from Sherlock Holmes on, detective fictions have tended to center on amateur detective whose ability to solve crimes indicates the inadequacies of the official police force" (65). The amateur detectives were better educated than the professional detectives who belong to the working class. As such, they were less efficient. However, P. D. James stresses the fact that despite the negative portrayal of the police concerning their incompetence, the policemen were far from being corrupt. She writes: "Individual officers might be portrayed as ineffective, plodding, slow-witted and ill-educated, but never as corrupt" (James 18-9).

For McCreet, though Newsome enjoys a reputation of being an intelligent inspector, he is corrupt, as he runs a secret network of constables that spy on the illicit activities in London. When Sir Richard learns about it, he forces Newsome to join the River Police as a punishment. He also makes his return to the Detective Force questionable. As Newsome continues pursuing criminals in his own way, Williamson comes to the conclusion that "Mr Newsome is a serpent at the heart of Justice. There is little of which he cannot be suspected" (*The Masked Adversary* 144).

As for the issue of crime in McCreet's novels, whilst Poe and Doyle start with a demonstration of the skill of the detective, McCreet starts each of his novels with an unusual crime that is connected to the thematic concerns of the novel in question. In his novels, McCreet deals with a wide range of crimes such as murder, incendiarism, smuggling, theft, kidnapping, and forgery. However, for the epilogue and/or the first chapter, he always chooses a murder.

The Incendiary's Trail opens with the murder of the conjoined twins named Eliza-Beth and so it focuses on the question of deformity and freakery. The horrors of such a murder find ways to the pages of different newspapers that are full of references to Madame Tussaud's Chamber of Horror. "Hideous murder in Lambeth! Two-headed monster slain by Killer! House of horrors in our midst!" reads one of the titles (*The Incendiary's Trail* 64). On the other hand, *The Vice Society* starts with a prologue that takes the reader seven years back in time to witness the fall of Mrs. Williamson from the Monument and then it takes the reader to the present of the narrative in the first chapter in order to make him/her learn about the fall of Jonathan Sampson. *The Vice Society* deals with the theme of falling from grace.

The Thieves' Labyrinth opens with the murder of William Barton, the tidewaiter, on the tolled Waterloo Bridge. As the novel unfolds itself, the reader starts to realize that thematic concerns of the novel are about the river crimes. Finally, *The Masked Adversary* starts with the discovery of the wax effigy of Lucius Boyle instead of his body in his grave as well as finding a wax effigy of the killed PC Taylor. As the events progress, Boyle's masked agent commits a murder and attributes it to former detective Williamson. As such, this novel explores the ways in which truth can be fabricated. Thus, in McCreet's four novels, murder is a key trope used for creating a "gripping" and a "galvaniz[ing]" effect (*Before You Write Your Novel* 71; *The Incendiary's Trail* 14).

McCreet writes that reading about suicides from the Monument in *The Times* published in the nineteenth century has made him realize that starting with "such a suicide would make a gripping first chapter" (*Before You Write Your Novel* 71). This notion probably finds its origin in his belief that "nothing galvanizes the metropolis like a murder" (*The Incendiary's Trail* 14). More importantly, McCreet explains in his book *Before You Write Your Novel: Essential Skills for the First-Time Novelist* that "by limiting yourself to primary sources, you also increase your chances of turning up material that nobody else has used. I've discovered stories in nineteenth-century newspapers that formed major plot elements in my books" (*Before You Write Your Novel* 64). In The Acknowledgment page of *The Vice Society*, he gives credit to "JW – unsolved death, 1849" and "MB – suicide, 1842." For the contemporary writers' interest in crimes, we turn to Jerome de Groot. De Groot finds that "exploration of the past through the consideration of particularly horrific crimes or occasions is common in recent British culture" (*Remaking History* 192).

Owing to the ontological aspect that the metafictional text explores, McCreet's novels show a self-conscious recognition of their ontological status as texts belonging to the genre of detective fiction. As such, there are significant references to the conventions of crime fiction. One such example is when Dr Hammerton defines crime, he says: "A crime is more than just a weapon and a victim, what? It is a tangled story that science may unravel – or, at least philosophy" (*The Masked Adversary* 105). It is this desired whole that comes out of disconnected parts that readers along with detectives seek to find.

Dr Hamilton's acute understanding of the crime makes him extend the range of the suspects to include the detective. He asks PC Cullen: "Who better to commit a crime than the man who would investigate it? It takes a special skill to leave a body so conspicuously – to leave so many apparent clues – and still not to be caught" (*Ibid.* 107). Though the murderer of PC Taylor is not a detective, he is an expert whom the Metropolitan Police frequently employs. This incident connects the novel to McCreet's general interest in a tension that underlies his novels. This tension is between appearance and reality.

As for the victim, McCreet exposes the way the marginalized individuals in the society receive less attention than the middle-class individuals. McCreet shows that the class of the victim plays a role in the kind of attention that he/she gets. As such, McCreet brings to the center the stories of some of the neglected victims in the Victorian society. A case in point is the murder of a prostitute in *The Vice Society*. In the novel, the police surgeon says to Inspector Newsome: "Inspector Newsome – this is quite preposterous. The girl [prostitute] is a nothing. There will not even be a headline about her" (*The Vice Society* 223). Considering the surgeon's attitudes, it seems that the tragic death of the poor eventually remains unsolved if it is not connected to a wider scheme. Inspector Newsome, for example, starts asking his constables to report the death of any prostitute only after he finds a connection with the fall of Jonathan Sampson of the Continental Club. Likewise, in *The Incendiary's Trail*, the death of the young performer with deformity of the freak show becomes more important as it becomes connected to the Red Jaw (Boyle).

In addition to the victims of murder, McCreet explores the victims of fraud and theft. In *The Vice Society*, McCreet dwells on the crimes committed by writers. In the novel, the unreliable narrator sustains himself by writing fake begging letters to rich people. The reader finds that he is quite an expert in his begging letters. He invents, for example, people facing tragic circumstances that can earn the sympathies of rich patrons. However, he keeps notes of each fake identity, so as not to provide wrong details. More importantly, he tries to keep a consistent handwriting style for each fake identity that he invents. As Williamson works for the Mendicity Society, he tries to detect fake begging letters that were popular at the time. Another type of a victim is the owner of the four-masted brig *Aurora*. Heedless of the threats of the criminals who perform such an elaborate theft, *Aurora*'s owner, Mr Timbs, along with some of the sailors face a horrible death in *The Thieves' Labyrinth*.

Central to McCreet's novels is the representation of the criminal. These characters range from thieves, murderers, incendiaries, to smugglers. A good example of a thief is the one that Dyson spots on an omnibus. He is a large man with a false wooden arm, while his real arm finds its way to the pockets of the passengers because it is not visible (*The Thieves' Labyrinth* 54; 56). Dyson watches this thief and then follows him because he is sure that he has stolen the swan diamond brooch.

The depiction of a thief who deceives the victims with his/her false arm forms intertextuality with Liza Picard's book *Victorian London: The Life of a City 1840-1870*. She writes: "A respectable looking female sitting necessarily close to another passenger might appear to have her gloved hands modestly clasped in her lap, but one hand might be false, while her real hand was busy in her neighbor's pockets" (Picard 39). As for the hierarchy among the thieves, Vidocq says to Sir Richard Mayne: "I need hardly tell you that every criminal is vain – this much is known to every agent of the law. The pickpocket thinks himself better than the common burglar; the cracksman thinks himself above the pickpocket and so on" (*The Masked Adversary* 43). In McCreet's novels, Dyson has the skills of a cracksman, which he uses to aid the Metropolitan Police.

The other important type of a criminal is the murderer. McCreet looks into different types of murderers. Some belong to the upper class such as the members of the Society for the Suppression of Vice. Their killing is part of experimentation with evil for the mere purpose of satisfying their hedonistic desires. The Victorian writer Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) explores such a tendency in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). Influenced by Lord Henry Wotton's yellow book, Dorian leads the life of vice. During such a time, he cares less for the people that he hurts, especially the lower-class individuals. He only cares about his own selfish desires.

Unlike Wilde, McCreet gives more textual space for exploring the effect that the selfish desires of the rich have on the poor citizens.

On the other hand, some murderers are intelligent like Mr Figgs, who considers crime as art. As for the murderer, Vidocq states that a "murderer – if he retains any vestiges of sanity – is the proudest of all in his sordid deeds. He is the unassailable summit of crime. He is its Apollo, and his infamy is his immortality. His name lives for eternity" (*The Masked Adversary* 43). Others are mere tools in the hands of a master criminal like Bully Bradford and Hawkins who execute Boyle's plans.

Finally, the mastermind criminal is best represented in the character of Lucius Boyle, who does not allow to be stopped in any way, as his thirst for power is insatiable. However, Boyle is a mysterious character. In three of McCreet's four novels, Boyle's criminal work has a horrible impact on others, yet very little is known about him. The only character that possesses some knowledge about Boyle's personality is Dyson. The relationship between them has been struck during their boyhood.

As both Boyle and Dyson are parentless, they survive as the leaders of the street boys of London. Each has "been the only one the other feared" (*The Masked Adversary* 194). However, as they grow, they differ in their approaches to life. "Boyle's native cruelty fermented in his growing vessel, while Noah [Dyson] began to argue for the more honest living he knew his intelligence could easily procure. Boyle sought criminal means; Noah looked to commerce" (*The Incendiary's Trail* 191).

Despite such major differences, they do not part ways willingly. Rather, it is Boyle who implicates Dyson in a crime that causes his transportation to the New South Wales at the age of thirteen (*Ibid.* 192). To establish his authority as a sole leader among the other boys, Boyle kills a boy. Nevertheless, as he realizes the gravity of his first murder, he leaves the streets and lives in anonymity. In fact, another factor plays a role in Boyle's insistence on being invisible and living in anonymity. Boyle is a person with deformity. During his boyhood he has faced difficulties. "Some cursed him [Boyle] as the Devil's spawn; others treated him as one would a street dog. Indeed, his only salvation was that the fine stock of his birth had blessed him with a quick wit" (*Ibid.* 190). Despite such difficulties, Boyle has recognized at an early age the relationship between knowledge and power. As such, "he [Boyle] learned to read and write, collecting words like weapons" (*Ibid.* 209). More importantly, this insistence on learning is connected to Dyson because Boyle has "seen how Noah had beguiled the boys with his fancy words" (*Ibid.* 209).

Empowered by knowledge, Boyle devises complex crimes that baffle the Metropolitan Police. Fascinated with the many possibilities that his intellect can envision, he probes a wide range of crimes such as murder, smuggling, blackmail, political conspiracy, and incendiarism. It is as an incendiary that Dyson remembers him and it is Boyle's incendiary nature that the detectives want to understand. Williamson says: "He [Boyle] is an incendiary – he is accustomed to razing things to the ground and destroying them utterly so that not a trace remains" (*The Incendiary's Trail* 184). However, Boyle's own view of his mania for incendiarism is of a more transcendental nature. "There was beauty and drama in such a show, and he was the conductor of this symphony of fire" (*Ibid.* 208).

Another important convention of the classical detective fiction is closure. Nevertheless, McCreet's reworking of the genre manifests itself in his rejection of closure. At the end of each of McCreet's novels, the reader gets the impression that the event as lived is different from the event as narrated. Through this juxtaposition, McCreet puts emphasis on the notion that what enters the official records, such as the Police archives and the newspapers, is incomplete. As such, McCreet problematizes the reader's understanding of history.

Like closure, establishing order at the end of a detective plot is undermined in postmodern metafictional novels. Contrary to this postmodern practice, order is perceived as crucial to the traditional detective fiction. James believes that detective fiction perceives "virtue and good order as the norm for which all reasonable people strive, and which confirms our belief despite some evidence to the contrary, that we live in a rational, comprehensible and moral universe" (19). Though she realizes that order is not always established in real life situations, she finds that in detective fiction order must be established. Postmodern fiction, on the other hand, avoids such a tendency. Postmodern fiction puts emphasis on notions, such as uncertainty.

Within that context, Waugh writes that "in the post-modern period, the detective plot is being used to express not order but the irrationality of both the surface of the world and of its deep structures" (*Metafiction*

83). Much before Waugh, in his seminal book *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams has found that in Sherlock Holmes stories when the investigation stops, Holmes, the detective figure, leaves the matter to the authorities and at the same time he leaves the reader with an impression that there is a "clear abstract system beyond all bustle and fog" (277). However, Williams is aware that "another history" exists with other experiences and images (*Ibid.* 277). It is this other history that McCreet endeavors to underscore in his novels through employing the strategic tropes of historiographic metafiction. As detectives never manage to successfully read and interpret every piece of evidence and as they sometimes reach correct conclusions by mere chance, closure and order are never truly attained. Viewed in this context, the narratives of the past are incomplete.

While subverting the appropriated detective plot that takes the form of parodic intertextuality is an important postmodern metafictional technique, the other key metafictional technique is the use of an unreliable narrator. The unreliable narrator has the ability to cross boundaries between art and life. As such, the narrator destroys the linear progression of the events since the narrator controls the order of the events. As the narrator disturbs the order of the events, the narrator destroys the totality of life that the nineteenth-century novels tried to create. Accordingly, McCreet puts emphasis on a world where uncertainty finds its way.

Conclusion

McCreet's subversive techniques play an important role in reworking the conventions of detective fiction. As such, McCreet uses and abuses the conventions of the traditional detective novel for the purpose of exploring the power and the limitations of the traditional detective novel. More importantly, in his reworking of the detective novel through the postmodern metafictional mode, McCreet gives way to postmodern experimentation with form and content. As for the postmodern thematic concerns, McCreet uses the metafictional techniques to explore the epistemological concerns about truth, knowledge, and history in the nineteenth century.

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